

A RIGHTEOUS GOVERNMENT

by William M. Wachtel

From antiquity comes the famous saying that “man is by nature a political animal” (Aristotle). Since politics is the science and art of government, I suppose Aristotle meant that man is perpetually interested in and committed to the establishment and direction of an orderly society. From earliest times men have followed chiefs, patriarchs, kings and other leaders, hoping that this would ensure a stable and predictable way of life—peace and prosperity for the law-abiding, punishment and/or correction for the law-breakers. Laws, of course, are the expression of the various kinds of governments men have devised or chosen.

The founding fathers of this country were deeply concerned with the problem of establishing a just government, and the U.S. Constitution was the result of their deliberations and theories of government. It is a truism that almost any kind of government is preferable to the chaos and anarchy that prevail when law is ignored or rejected and political leaders become powerless to supply direction and guidance.

God’s Interest in Government

God established government in the beginning. Genesis 9:6, with its provision of capital punishment for the murderer, presupposes the establishment of an orderly system to seek out the criminal and deal with him on the basis of accepted legal procedure. This, in essence, is *government*. By the time of Genesis 11, a unified society has emerged in Shinar, and the governing authorities are in place to devise and direct in a national project (albeit an evil one).

The Apostle Paul made the classic statement about God’s part in human governments:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because

of conscience (Romans 13:1-5 NIV).

Paul had already told the Athenians that God *"hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation"* (Acts 17:26).

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Israel, a Theocracy

When God separated the family of Abraham from the other families of the earth, he said, *"Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him. For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him"* (Gen. 18:18,19). God's intention was to establish a righteous nation, with a righteous government, in the midst of all the corrupt nations and governments of the world. It was because of God's exclusive choice of Israel that he dealt so sternly with them:

Hear this word that the LORD hath spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up from the land of Egypt, saying, You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities. Can two walk together except they be agreed? (Amos 3:1-3).

Through Moses he had told them:

Thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth. The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: but because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. . . . Thou shalt therefore keep the commandments, and the statutes, and the judgments, which I command thee this day, to do them (Deut. 7:6-11).

Earlier, when about to give them the Ten Commandments, God declared:

Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an

holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel (Exo. 19:5,6).

This kind of government is called a *theocracy*—a government God has established and authorized and is actively directing. When we say that Israel was a theocracy, we assert that God himself was their ruler. He chose, of course, to rule them through human leaders he had appointed—Moses, Joshua, the judges, and later the kings. Samuel, the last of the judges, was disturbed at Israel's demand for a king *"that we also may be like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and fight our battles"*

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(1 Sam. 8:20). Their motive was a poor one, and in effect they were not rejecting Samuel so much as they were rejecting God as their leader (1 Sam. 8:7).

This did not change the fact that God still reserved to himself the right to choose their king and to oversee and judge his reign. So Israel remained a theocracy. After King Saul's failure to rule as God wished, the Lord chose David, *"a man after his own heart"* (1 Sam. 13:14). It was God who *"set up the throne of David over Israel and over Judah"* (2 Sam. 3:10). This divinely-established throne of David and his successors is actually called in Scripture *"the throne of the LORD"* (1 Chron. 29:23; compare 1 Chron. 28:4,5; 2 Chron. 9:8).

God's Promises to David

Some of the most amazing promises in Scripture were made to King David. Not only were his family to constitute a royal dynasty that would rule for centuries in Jerusalem, but also God envisaged a particular descendant of David whose rule would outshine them all!

And it shall come to pass, when thy days be expired that thou must go to be with thy fathers, that I will raise up thy seed after thee, which shall be of thy sons; and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build me an house, and I will stablish his throne for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son: and I will not take my mercy away from him, as I took it from him that was before thee: but I will settle him in mine house and in my kingdom for ever: and his throne shall be established for evermore (1 Chron. 17:10-14; compare 2 Sam. 7:12-16; Psalms 89:19-37; 132:10-18).

The Prophet Isaiah, living several centuries after David's time, did not consider these promises fulfilled, either in Solomon or in any other descendant of

David yet born. Rather, Isaiah looked forward to a “child” who would later be born, a “son” who would be given –

and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this (Isa. 9:6,7).

The Theocracy Overturned

The theocratic kings who descended from David and who ruled in Jerusalem were not always righteous men. Some of them, such as Ahaz and Manasseh, were in fact very wicked. The last good king was Josiah, who died around 610 B.C. He was followed by

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four kings, the final one being Zedekiah. Not only were these rulers spiritually bankrupt, but the people as a whole refused to be submissive to the will and ways of God.

Moreover all the chief of the priests, and the people, transgressed very much after all the abominations of the heathen; and polluted the house of the LORD which he had hallowed in Jerusalem. And the LORD God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers, rising up betimes, and sending; because he had compassion on his people, and on his dwelling place: but they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against his people, till there was no remedy (2 Chron. 36:14-16).

God’s solution was to bring an end to the theocracy, to destroy Jerusalem and the temple, and to drive his people into exile in Babylon and other lands, around 586 B.C. He had already pronounced judgment against King Zedekiah and the theocratic government in Jerusalem:

And thou, profane wicked prince of Israel, whose day is come, when iniquity shall have an end, thus saith the Lord GOD; Remove the diadem, and take off the crown: this shall not be the same: exalt him that is low, and abase him that is high. I will overturn, overturn, overturn, it: and it shall be no more, until he come whose right it is; and I will give it him (Ezek. 21:25-27).

After the fall of Zedekiah's government, no king from the line of David ever ruled again in Jerusalem. Even though many of the Jews later returned from exile to their homeland, they were never able to re-establish the Davidic monarchy. But, because of the promises God had made to David, those who believed God's Word continued to look and long for the promised Son of David to appear and to restore the theocracy. A popular title for this expected ruler was "the Messiah" (Hebrew for "the Anointed One," in Greek "the Christ"). Meanwhile, the theocracy remained in the state of being "overturned" – awaiting the coming of the one "*whose right it is,*" to whom God intended to "*give it.*"

The Son of David Appears

The very first thing the New Testament records about Jesus Christ is that he is "*the son of David*" (Matt. 1:1). To Matthew's Jewish readers, this was a most significant statement! When Jesus was about to be conceived in his mother, Mary, the angel Gabriel told her:

Thou. . . shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end (Luke 1:31-33).

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There had been an end of the first theocracy because of wickedness and disobedience. It had been overturned, and had not yet been restored. When Jesus' first disciples began to follow him, it was with the understanding and faith he was indeed "*the Messiah*" (John 1:41), the one promised by "*Moses. . . and the prophets*" (John 1:45), the expected "*King of Israel*" (John 1:49). After the crucifixion, two of his followers declared that they had "*trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel*" (Luke 24:21) – which in its historical context can mean only that they believed Jesus would restore the theocracy as the authorized king descended from David! Now that he had died, it appeared that their hopes were thwarted.

After his resurrection, Jesus spent forty days with his apostles, "*speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God*" (Acts 1:3). As he was about to leave them and ascend to his Father, they asked him a very significant question: "*Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?*" (Acts 1:6)

They knew that the Davidic kingdom, the theocratic monarchy, had long since been overturned. They also knew that a restoration of that government was implied in the promises that the Messiah would someday sit on the throne of David.

Jesus is sometimes depicted by Bible interpreters as rebuking them for misunderstanding the nature of his kingdom. A careful reading of the text, however, will show that it is these interpreters who need to be rebuked! Christ's reply reveals that he simply clarified the *time element*—it was not for them to know "*the times or the seasons*" (Acts 1:7) for the promised restoration. It was rather for them meanwhile to carry the gospel to "*the uttermost part of the earth*" (Acts 1:8)

The fact that there was no misunderstanding on their part regarding the literal restoration of the Davidic theocracy is evident from Peter's declaration sometime later, under the guidance of God's Spirit:

*He [God] shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you:
whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution (restoration)
of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets
since the world began (Acts 3:20,21).*

In these words Jesus is represented as being required ("*must*") to remain in heaven until a certain time is reached. At that point God will "*send*" his Son from heaven to bring about the restoration of all things prophesied from the beginning. We have already seen that these things include the re-establishment of the Davidic monarchy or theocracy. Jesus himself had promised, "*When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory*" (Matt. 25:31). In light of Luke 1:32 and Isaiah 9:6,7 we must conclude that the "*throne of his glory*" is none other than "*the throne of David*" — which Christ will inherit and occupy as King "*for ever*"!

While Jesus remains in heaven, the throne of David remains unoccupied and the theocracy remains overturned. In the meantime Christ is seated with his Father on his Father's throne, awaiting the time when he will be given his own throne — the throne of David:

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To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne (Rev. 3:21).

Here there are clearly *two* thrones mentioned: that of the Father and that of his Son. The throne of the Father is in heaven. Christ promises to sit on his own "*glorious throne*" (Matt. 25:31) when he comes with all the holy angels (see RSV).

The throne of Christ, inherited from David, must therefore be *on the earth*, as the throne of David *always was!* So Jesus taught his disciples to pray: “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10 NIV).

There is no evidence in Scripture that the Kingdom comes or is established at any time before the King returns to restore it. There are many promises of Christ’s second coming as a literal event to transpire in the future (e.g., Acts 1:11; 1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thess. 4:15,16; 2 Thess. 2:1; 2 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 9:28 et al.). The Parable of the Nobleman depicts Christ as going away to a “*far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return*” (Luke 19:12). He did go away—he went to heaven; there he receives the royal authority (compare Daniel 7:13,14), and then returns, “*having received the kingdom*” (Luke 19:15). This is all very clear and plain, without complicated or ambiguous language.

The Coming Righteous Government

This earth has known very little righteous government in all its history. A succession of corrupt rulers and ungodly nations has appeared on the world stage, as players in a drama. But in the pages of Scripture a brilliant description is found—in many texts—foretelling the rise of a government that will be world-wide in extent, peaceful in character, righteous and just, and centered in Jerusalem. Here are a few of the texts:

It shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the LORD’S house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all the nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more (Isa. 2:2-4).

There shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. . . . And he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears. But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked. . . . They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea (Isa. 11:1-9).

I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem, and the battle bow shall be cut off: and he shall speak peace unto the heathen: and his dominion shall be from sea even to sea, and from the river even to the ends of the earth (Zech. 9:10).

At that time they shall call Jerusalem the throne of the LORD; and all nations shall be gathered unto it, to the name of the LORD, to Jerusalem: neither shall they walk any more after the imagination of their evil heart (Jer. 3:17; compare Zech. 12:6).

Give the king thy judgments, O God, and thy righteousness unto the king's son. He shall judge thy people with righteousness, and thy poor with judgment. . . . He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass: as showers that water the earth. In his days shall the righteous flourish; and abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth. He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth (Psalm 72:1-8).

The four Gospels mention over and over again the “kingdom of God” or the “kingdom of heaven.” In their historical context these expressions refer clearly to the righteous government which God will set up on this earth by means of his Son, Jesus the Messiah, when he sends his Son back here. (To turn the “kingdom *of* heaven” to a “kingdom *in* heaven” is to do violence to the language, the context, and the historical and theological background in which these expressions originated!)

Nebuchadnezzar's famous dream, interpreted by Daniel, foresaw the succession of world empires—Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. Following these, he saw a government which the God of heaven shall set up,

a kingdom which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever (Dan. 2:44).

It was later revealed to Daniel that this

kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the most High, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him (Dan. 7:27).

The Kingdom is coming! Christ is coming! And he bids his people to be ready, “for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come” (Matt. 24:42).

